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Life of Abraham Lincoln.

REMARKS

OF

HON. LOREN E. WHEELER,

OF ILLINOIS,

IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES,

Saturday, February 12, 1916.

The SPEAKER. Under the special order the gentleman from Illinois [Mr. WHEELER] has 20 minutes in which to address the House. [Applause.]

Mr. WHEELER. Mr. Speaker, "If we could first know where we are, and whither we are tending, we could better judge what to do and how to do it."

If Abraham Lincoln were living to-day and occupied the same position he once occupied on the floor of this House, he no doubt would find ample occasion for uttering those same words which were included in an address delivered by him before the Illinois convention in 1858.

To me there is in the annals of liberty no greater day than February 12, 1809. On that day Abraham Lincoln was brought into the world. And on this, the one hundred and seventh anniversary of his birth, I, as a Representative chosen by the good people of the congressional district wherein he lived, consider it not only a duty but an honor to be able at this time and in this place to join in the grateful acknowledgments of a Republic to which he "gave the last full measure of devotion."

We can not honor, but we can show that we still cherish his memory by adding our tributes to that wealth of veneration and gratitude which the world this day extends to the savior of the Union and the emancipator of a race.

To all who have had the pleasure of such a rich investment of their time as to study the character and works of Abraham Lincoln, his ever-towering greatness appears more apparent. The choicest literature by master minds has been inspired by the life of Lincoln, and he would indeed be a bold man who would deem himself capable of presenting anything original as to his character and his acts.

The mellow temperament of this backwoods boy of Kentucky, enriched by the hardships of humble birth, poverty, and toil, has made his life a veritable garden for research.

As a rail splitter, as a lawyer, as a politician, as a husband and father, and, finally, as the head of a nation, his every word and deed has been subjected to the scrutiny of historians and students. And it can be truthfully said that as new generations read of his works and study Abraham Lincoln's life the more remarkable appears his character.

Therefore it is but fitting that I here repeat the words of Henry Ward Beecher, which he spoke at the death of Abraham Lincoln, when he said:

Not Springfield's, but Illinois'; not Illinois', but the Nation's; not the Nation's, but the world's, is this man.

While the name of Lincoln has most frequently been associated with the preservation of the Union and the emancipation of the slaves, I shall not dwell upon his conduct as an official, save to reveal certain principles he then expounded and which may prove very interesting at this time.

LINCOLN ADVOCATED NECESSARY PREPAREDNESS.

Lincoln subordinated all other considerations to the one great object of saving the Union. With his usual insight into human nature, he foresaw the joy with which the privileged classes in society would hail the dismemberment of the Republic.

He saw all too clearly that the western continent would become the prey of the Old World powers if the Union were not maintained "one and indivisible."

In a letter to Gov. Seymour, Lincoln said:

Shall we shrink from the necessary means to maintain our free Government which our grandfathers employed to establish it and our own fathers have already employed to maintain it? Are we degenerate? Has the manhood of our race run out?

Was not the saving of the Union the greatest act of preparedness in history?

A chorus of rejoicing among the scions of the monarchies of Europe greeted every defeat of the Federal arms, and in our darkest hours we heard but one expression from those enemies of free institutions: "The bubble Republic has burst."

This premature rejoicing was but the prelude to a well-planned program of conquest of the American people by the monarchies of the Old World.

But the preservation of the Union sounded the death knell of all such aggressive campaigns.

HIS SPIRIT ROSE SUPREME.

And during the hour of his greatest trials, when he was subjected to countless insults, indignities, and humiliation, often at the hands of those whom he had considered his supporters, and even from the members of his own official family, his spirit rose supreme. Seward, on a famous occasion, and Chase, repeatedly, were guilty of acts savoring so much of disloyalty to their chief that it is almost incomprehensible how he could have ignored them.

But he overlooked and forgave all. Not one word of personal resentment or rebuke can be found in all his writings and speeches. This fact alone has inspired countless orators and writers to proclaim his freedom from the faults and failings of ordinary humanity.

Feeling that his mission was to save the Union, he unselfishly subordinated all other considerations to that one supreme object. If a man appeared best adapted to a certain work, Lincoln assigned him that work and kept him on it regardless of how he himself was treated by that man.

HIS LETTERS AN INSPIRATION TO THE YOUNG.

It has been said that Franklin's autobiography is the most helpful book a young man could read to gain inspiration and aid

in the struggle to make his way in this world, but without disparaging what Franklin may have said, there is in certain letters of Lincoln more valuable advice than can be found anywhere. He had known all the discouragements and rebuffs which attend the efforts of a poor young man, and could therefore speak with the voice of experience and authority.

With what sanity and charity he could advise those who, amid almost insurmountable obstacles, struggle to make their way in the world, may best be shown by a letter he wrote to William H. Herndon July 10, 1848, which was as follows:

DEAR WILLIAM: Your letter covering the newspaper slips was received last night. The subject of that letter is exceedingly painful to me, and I can not but think there is some mistake in your impression of the motives of the old men. I suppose I am now one of the old men, and I declare on my veracity, which I think is good with you, that nothing could afford me more satisfaction than to learn that you and others of my young friends at home are doing battle in the contest, and endearing themselves to the people, and taking a stand far above any I have ever been able to reach in their admiration.

I can not conceive that other old men feel differently. Of course I can not demonstrate what I say, but I was young once, and I am sure I was never ungenerously thrust back. I hardly know what to say. The way for a young man to rise is to improve himself every way he can, never suspecting that anybody wishes to hinder him. Allow me to assure you that suspicion and jealousy never did help any man in any situation. There may sometimes be ungenerous attempts to keep a young man down, and they will succeed, too, if he allows his mind to be diverted from its true channel, to brood over the attempted injury. Cast about and see if this feeling has not injured every person you have ever known to fall into it.

Now, in what I have said I am sure you will suspect nothing but sincere friendship. I would save you from a fatal error. You have been a laborious, studious young man. You are far better informed on almost all subjects than I have ever been. You can not fail in any laudable object unless you allow your mind to be improperly directed. I have somewhat the advantage of you in the world's experience, merely by being older, and it is this that induces me to advise.

TOWERED ABOVE HIS ADVERSARIES.

Another striking trait of his character is revealed by Nicolay and Hay, when, after describing the duel with Gen. Shields, they say:

Although the rest of his life was passed in hot and earnest debate, he never again descended to the level of his adversaries, who would gladly enough have resorted to unseemly wrangling. In later years it became his duty to give an official reprimand to a young officer who had been court-martialed for a quarrel with one of his associates.

The reprimand is probably the gentlest recorded in the annals of penal discourses, and it shows in few words the principles which ruled the conduct of this great and peaceable man. It has never before been published and it deserves to be written in letters of gold on the walls of every gymnasium and college:

"The advice of a father to his son, 'Beware of entrance to a quarrel, but being in, bear it that the opposed may beware of thee,' is good, but not the best. Quarrel not at all. No man resolved to make the most of himself can spare time for personal contention. Still less can he afford to take all the consequences, including the vitiating of his temper and the loss of self-control. Yield larger things to which you can show no more than equal right; and yield lesser ones, though clearly your own. Better give your path to a dog than be bitten by him in contesting for the right. Even killing the dog would not cure the bite."

Who can estimate the good which the rising generation may reap from the study and contemplation of such a noble character? The lesson of his early struggles remains an inspiration and encouragement to the youth of all climes and ages. In view of the educational advantages enjoyed by those of to-day, it is difficult to appreciate the obstacles which he met and conquered. His life is one long confirmation of the truth, that

genius is a combination of untiring application and unquenchable ambition.

Possessing none of the advantages of a college education, he nevertheless towered intellectually above all the statesmen of his time. This may have been lost sight of by many owing to the fact that we have learned to dwell on his all-comprehending heart, rather than on his superb intellect.

For his heart was as tender as a woman's. [Applause.] His public and private life is one long record of acts of mercy. His inability to resist the appeal of a father or mother in behalf of a soldier boy sentenced to death for some default of duty kept him in constant trouble with his Secretary of War. But how many now bless his name for those acts of mercy! [Applause.]

LIVING TESTIMONIALS OF HIS CHARACTER.

Before concluding my remarks I should forego a great pleasure if I failed to voice the deep satisfaction of the citizens of Springfield that they are still blessed with the presence and companionship of two men who were honored by Lincoln with his deepest confidence and lasting friendship. I refer to Mr. John W. Bunn and Dr. William Jayne. Through the conversations and reminiscences of these estimable gentlemen we are brought into direct contact with the spirit of the great emancipator, and those who visit the home of Lincoln would find it a rare and never-to-be-forgotten privilege to meet these patriarchs, who, by reason of their long and intimate acquaintance with him, can picture the man more vividly than could any printed page.

An apostle of truth, an apostle of mercy, an apostle of liberty, language is pitifully poor when we seek to describe him.

Future ages will produce great statesmen and patriots, but the "typical American" has come and gone. With ever-widening circles on the sea of time, his fame will grow. In all ages the devotees of liberty will repair to his tomb as to a shrine. [Loud applause.]

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